

# Memorable Play in Dungeons & Dragons: Understanding the Relationship Between TTRPG Design and Peak Play Experiences

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## Abstract

*This paper presents results from an online survey (n=354) which aimed to better understand the appeal of the tabletop role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons [D&D]. Here, we focus on responses to the open-ended survey question: “What has been your most memorable moment in a D&D game? Please describe an example from your own play.” Common themes in responses were connected to three key elements of D&D’s design: gameplay, role-play, and storytelling. We subsequently identify 1) the importance of D&D’s “critical” dice-roll mechanic, 2) how D&D enables memorable role-play, and 3) the enduring appeal of heroic stories. By emphasizing how elements of D&D’s design can impact players’ experiences and enjoyment of the game, this paper offers new insights into the appeal of D&D which go beyond simplistic descriptions of the game being ‘fun’ or ‘social’.*

**Keywords:** Dungeons & Dragons, memorable play, gameplay, role-play, storytelling, dice

## 1. Introduction

As games and gaming continue to grow in popularity and attention within academia—and are an important part of human and social experiences (Orme & Poor, 2023)—continued investigation of their appeal is necessary. Despite being nearly 50 years old, the tabletop role-playing game [TTRPG] Dungeons & Dragons [D&D] has an enduring appeal and has in recent years experienced a significant resurgence in play (Scriven, 2021) and scholarship. In this paper we contribute to this body of work by examining the appeal of D&D via its most memorable moments for players. In doing so, this paper provides new insights into the appeal of D&D’s gameplay, role-play and storytelling elements, and connects these appealing elements to components of D&D’s design that have previously been overlooked. Furthermore, we demonstrate how the study of memorable moments elicits rich player responses that can be linked to a game’s design

elements. In doing so, we contribute to the field what we term the ‘memorable moment methodology’: the study of games through their most memorable moments.

## 2. Background and Context

First released in 1974, D&D has experienced fluctuations in its popularity, reception, and player base. Historically, D&D was often viewed as a complex high fantasy hobby and was stigmatized when it became associated with the ‘Satanic Panic’ of the 1980s (e.g., Laycock 2015, pp. 101–136). Since then, D&D’s reputation, rules, and player demographics have evolved, and the game is experiencing a modern resurgence in play (Sidhu & Carter, 2020).

As D&D’s influence is widespread (e.g., LaLone, 2019; Voorhees et al., 2012; Zagal & Deterding 2018), there has been significant research conducted on the game in various fields of interest. Fine’s (1983) foundational ethnography of D&D play and players from the 1980s remains widely referenced when examining the appeal and nature of social gameplay dynamics. Beyond the game’s social appeal, contemporary D&D literature investigates various factors that contribute to, or detract from, the game’s appeal. For example, D&D’s immersive play experiences (e.g., Wouters et al. 2021) and related media representations (e.g., Chalk 2018; Jones, 2021; Sidhu & Carter, 2020) have been linked to the game’s contemporary resurgence. Conversely, valuable critical consideration of D&D’s inclusivity, accessibility, and in-game representations (e.g., Cote 2020, 190-197; Jones & Pobuda 2020; Stang & Trammell 2019; Stokes 2017; Trammell 2014)—often linked to the game’s published rulesets and mechanical structures which privilege certain toxic hegemonies and playstyles (Dashiell 2017, 2018)—encapsulate why the game may not appeal to everyone.

As public and scholarly interest in the game continues to rise (see Sidhu, Carter & Zagal, 2024), it is necessary to investigate what motivates play of the almost 50-year-old non-digital game. One way to do so

is by understanding the game’s appeal—which we approached through the lens of ‘memorable’ play experiences.

### 3. Methodology

A two-part mixed-methods study was designed to address the broader aim of this research project: to understand the contemporary appeal of D&D. The first part included three focus groups (14 participants in groups of 5 or 4, aged 24-55), with discussions focused on developing a broad understanding of why players were playing D&D and the types of experiences that made D&D appealing. The focus group results informed the design of an online survey, in particular the development of a four-part taxonomy of appealing D&D play which was designed to go beyond simply enjoying the game: Memorable Play, Emotional Play, Pivotal Play, and Serious Play.

*Memorable Play* highlighted experiences at the forefront of players’ minds or experiences of D&D that sustained substantial player interest. *Emotional Play* elicited understanding of any prominent emotions arising from D&D play—regardless of whether they were positive or negative. *Pivotal Play* recognized the more transformative experiences of D&D play, and *Serious Play* captured learning based play.

In our other work, we have focused on pivotal play and serious play, providing insight into the potential application of D&D to educational contexts (see Sidhu & Carter 2021; 2023). In this paper, we focus on developing new insights into D&D’s appeal via memorable play. Survey respondents were recruited by social media advertisements (via Facebook, Reddit, and Discord). In anticipation of Reddit responses skewing white/male, we deliberately recruited from Facebook groups and Discord servers targeted towards non-male identifying D&D players (e.g. ‘Women+ of Dungeons and Dragons’). The survey was advertised as being about “Player Experiences in Dungeons & Dragons” and the final survey sample consisted of 354 participants (aged 18-63, mean= 30 years old).<sup>1</sup>

#### 3.1. Analysis

In this paper, our results and analysis are focused on responses to the open-ended survey question: “*What has been your most memorable moment in a D&D game? Please describe an example from your own play*”. In part, this is due to scope (responses to all four questions in the appealing play taxonomy totaled over 60,000 words). However, we argue that memorable moments represent a form of peak experience that offers critical insight into understanding the game’s appeal and

the specific elements that contribute to its success.

In accordance with a grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006), qualitative responses underwent open and axial coding. Open codes identified common expressions or concepts in the data, with axial coding identifying meta-themes that linked these initial codes into three main categories that form the basis of the presentation of results: *gameplay*, *role-play*, and *storytelling*. An initial codebook was developed to test intercoder reliability between the researchers, and further refinement of the themes.

We coded 170 (of 354) responses, at which point we felt we had reached data saturation. 22 responses described an experience from the perspective of the DM and were coded separately. Five responses were uncoded due to a lack of detail, such as simply stating ‘Tavern Visit’. Seven responses described an experience that was memorable because it was the ‘first time’—such as completing a mission or doing damage for the first time—which have been excluded. The remaining 136 responses broke down as follows:

**Table 1. Summary of responses to the question, ‘What has been your most memorable moment in a D&D game?’.**

Codes	# Responses
<b>Gameplay</b>	<b>64</b>
Achievement	20
Funny	14
Creative	11
Drama	10
Death	9
<b>Roleplay</b>	<b>40</b>
Ethics	12
In-Game Relationships	10
Roleplay	6
Sacrifice	6
Creative	3
Funny	3
<b>Storytelling</b>	<b>24</b>
Storytelling	11
Epic	7
Funny	6
<b>Social</b>	<b>8</b>

### 4. Quantitative Survey Results Summary

In this section, we summarize quantitative and demographic results from the survey. There is limited prior research (Trygstad, 2019) and public data available from D&D’s publishers (Wizards of the Coast, 2020) that identifies, for instance, the gender

<sup>1</sup> A copy of the survey is available at <https://bit.ly/3Lalx6q>

demographics of the D&D player community, which is often described as having seen a resurgence in recent years due to shows like *Stranger Things*, the rise of spectated D&D, and the increased accessibility of recent D&D editions (Sidhu & Carter, 2020).

The final survey sample consisted of 354 participants (aged 18-63, mean= 30.09 years). Most participants (n=218, 61.58%) were below 30 years old. Many participants (n=222, 62.71%) had begun playing D&D in 2014 or later, with 2018 (n=47, 13.28%) being the most common year of initial play, and the 5th edition ruleset being the most popular for first play (n=204, 57.63%). As 5th edition D&D is the latest edition, and only iteration of the game that has active publishing of official play materials, these findings support prior research that indicates a greater interest towards D&D due to its resurgence (Sidhu & Carter, 2020).

In comparison to the gender demographics of digital games our results indicate near-equal diversity, with 48.59% (n=172) of participants identified as binary male, 43.22% (n=153) of participants identified as binary female, 6.50% (n=23) of participants identified as non-binary, and only 1.69% (n=6) provided no response or preferred not to answer.

To understand the breakdown of roles played within the game, a demographic question centered on whether participants were players, DMs, or both, was asked. Most participants (n=217, 61.30%) were both, significantly less (n=104, 29.38%) were only players, and even less (n=33, 9.32%) than that were only DMs.

To gain a better understanding of the context of D&D play, we asked participants who they played D&D with. As the question was open-ended, we received many variations of responses. However, when generalized and coded, the vast majority of participants (n=290, 81.92%) played the game with their friends, a portion played with their family (n=45, 12.71%), and the remainder (n=19, 5.37%) responded in other terms (e.g., colleagues, partners, strangers online, etc.).

## 4.1 Game Elements and Gender

A set of Likert questions regarding the importance of different game elements was included, with categories based on focus-group responses. While including a full analysis of these is beyond the scope of this paper, we summarize that the elements of individual play experiences such as Story/Narrative Progression (Top 2 Box Score: n=325, 91.81%), Player Choice (Top 2 Box Score: n=323, 91.24%), and Individual Character/Player Growth (Top 2 Box Score: n=317, 89.55%), were ranked the most positively.

Furthermore, there was statistical gender significance present in chi-square tests relating to the importance of Safe Playing Spaces (outside the game

[ $p < 0.01$ ] for women and non-binary respondents. This supports previous research that has argued that the resurgent appeal of D&D in non-male player communities is due to the greater control players have over who they play with in comparison to online games (Cote, 2020). This was also affirmed by qualitative responses that emphasized the importance of safe spaces in participants' positive experiences with D&D.

## 5. What Makes Play Memorable?

In this paper, we focus on the results of our analysis of responses to the question, "*What has been your most memorable moment in a D&D game? Please describe an example from your own play*". We found that memorable play provided critical insight into the appeal of D&D that usefully goes beyond 'fun' and simplistic descriptions of elements of the game that are the most enjoyable. While other work has examined 'golden', 'extraordinary', intense, or pivotal moments (e.g. Montola, 2010; Adams, 2013; Bowman, 2015; Sidhu & Carter, 2021), our contribution here is to tie such moments to the affordances the game itself provides rather than focusing primarily on player experience. We define memorable moments as a form of peak play experience that summarizes why players continue to play D&D. Here, our results are presented according to the three main categories that emerged through our coding process: *gameplay*, *role-play*, and *storytelling*.

### 5.1. Memorable Gameplay

Gameplay emerged as a theme to capture the memorable moments from play that were related to the game mechanics of playing D&D, rather than storytelling or role-play elements. These were thus typically based on or around moments in play that occurred due to the rolling of dice.

**5.1.1. Achievement.** The most common category (n=20/63) of memorable gameplay moments were associated with achieving something in the game—an aspect of D&D that reflects the crucial balance between challenge and reward. The majority of these moments were individual achievements (n=13/20), principally because of the power or effectiveness of the player's character in defeating an enemy in game. For instance, a situation where a player "singlehandedly defeated one of the big bad guys" (27F, Player) or "the moment that I took down my first 'big' enemy all my myself" (18M, DM/Player). As one respondent described:

We were in a really tough fight against a cave dragon. As the cave dragon went to fly away, the DM granted my dwarf Big Z an opportunity attack

and it struck down that cave dragon. When I took down that dragon, it felt like the greatest accomplishment I've reached. (28F, DM/Player)

Not all of the moments were individual; one participant described “taking out a dragon in 2 rounds because of party planning and teamwork” (25F, DM/Player). What connects this example to the memorable moments of individual achievement is a common thread of power or domination over the obstacles that the DM placed in front of them—whether it was defeating a cave dragon, solving a riddle, climbing an unclimbable tower, or surviving a challenging situation.

Of note (and for further discussion in section 6.1), about one third (n=7/20) of these moments of high—and often individual—achievement occurred due to ‘Natural 20’ moments, colloquially known as ‘Nat20s’. This is where a player rolls the highest possible result on a 20-sided die to decide the outcome of an event.

**5.1.2. Funny.** The next most common category of memorable gameplay moments were simply funny moments (n=14/63). These included the absurd—such as a 6ft tall warlock attempting to hide behind a 3ft tall kobold (50M, DM/Player)—the silly—such as being stuck for 20 minutes because nobody thought to knock on the door (22F, DM/Player)—or a poorly chosen spell having extremely unfortunate results:

my brother cast darkness, only blinding our party as the enemy didn't need eyesight, [and we] all got eaten by spiders. (27M, DM/Player)

Half of the memorable moments coded as funny featured ‘Nat20’ rolls, or the opposite, the dreaded ‘Nat1’: a dice roll that means the worst possible result occurs from an attempted action. For a creative DM, Nat20s or Nat1s empower them to introduce the absurd. As one player described their most memorable moment:

Rolled a nat 20 charming a beholder so it wouldn't destroy us. DM ended up turning it into an overly attached girlfriend NPC that constantly came to check up on me and I had to roll deception each time to convince her I wasn't cheating on her. I managed it for a solid few months until I failed and we had to fight her in the middle of a town. (26F, Player)

What also connected the funny memorable moments was their sociality. One participant mentioned how their case of an unfortunate battle with a badger (due to two failed Nat1s) “happened like 2 years ago but the four of us still bring it up in conversation” (33F, DM/Player). Another (23NB, DM/Player) described how their group had matching pins (stating “Intimidated

Door”) that commemorated their memorable moment which was a Nat20 on an ‘intimidate door’ attempt. D&D is universally characterized as being appealing because it is social, but in this theme we see the importance of that sociality for creating memorable moments.

**5.1.3. Creative.** Where achievements were often individual, memorable creative moments were more often based in teamwork: creatively devising a way to overcome to obstacles set by the DM. Often these moments were situations that went awry but succeeded in an unexpected way—like having to work together to throw a desk outside a window, in order to access a diary locked inside (19F, Player).

What distinguished creative moments from the prior category of achievements was a focus in the responses not on the power or domination the moment had shown, but the satisfaction of having solved a situation through original thinking, something prior work has noted as a key positive quality of roleplay (Bowman, 2010). One respondent's memorable moment was “thinking quickly on the fly by throwing a bomb that got tossed to me to blow open a door to start a prison revolt” (19M, Player), while another described “Preventing a fight by projecting a peace sign” (25F, DM/Player).

‘Nat20s’ were the least common here (n=3/11). Where mentioned, they reflected the power of the mechanic to turn any solution—no matter how absurd—into a wildly successful one.

**5.1.4. Drama.** Other moments (n=10/63) were memorable because of dramatic tension, commonly understood in game design as originating in “dynamics that encourage a rising tension, a release, and a denouement” (Hunicke et al. 2004, p. 1724). While these moments often involved achievement, such as narrowly avoiding a total party kill, what makes these moments memorable for our respondents was not the domination over the obstacle, but experience of rising tension. As one respondent summarized at the end of their response:

.. the fun of watching two party members try and run, fail [dice rolls] and get hit, as well as the adrenaline of seeing the boulder land in the space behind me, was amazing. We were all shouting!! (25F, Player)

Terminology like “adrenaline”, “stress”, “tension”, “nerve racking”, were common across memorable moments of drama. A couple of responses (2 out of 10, 20%) mentioned Nat20 moments—describing situations where players scraped by because of the lucky roll—while another described the rising tension of three consecutive Nat1s (26M, DM/Player).

**5.1.5. Death.** The final category of memorable gameplay moments was those that involved the death of a player or NPC (n=9). This maps to findings from Sidhu & Carter (2021), on whose study we based the wording of our question. In response to the same question, 85% of participants in Sidhu & Carter’s study mentioned experiences with death, with follow-up questions and research in that study leading to the development of the concept of “pivotal play” to articulate how D&D facilitates appealing, memorable, and transformative play experiences.

In our survey, death in gameplay was memorable in instances where someone sacrificed themselves for the group, or where they had an epic last moment, such as:

... a natural 1 on a wisdom save. This led to the elimination of my character’s sentience and spark for life, taking him out of the game completely, but not before he made one last move, trying to shoot the mage who did this to him, and with a natural 20, the character got their vengeance before slowly disappearing. (20M, DM/Player)

This included highly emotional experiences, with participants describing having “burst into tears”, feeling “really sad” and having been “heartbroken” by an in-game death.

Three examples of gameplay death were memorable for our respondents because of the efforts that the other players went to try and bring them back. For one of these respondents this was memorable because it “made me feel so loved and made me realize how close we had become” (22F, Player). A fourth had a similar example, but where they themselves realized a way to dodge the death that had felt inevitable after rolling a Nat1 (20M, DM/Player). These findings map to prior research into death in D&D (e.g., Jacques & Tobin, 2020; Sidhu & Carter, 2021), further highlighting the importance of positive-negative experiences in D&D’s appeal (Wright et al. 2020)

## 5.2. Memorable Role-play

Role-play was defined as a theme to capture memorable moments that occur because a player was acting in a way that was true to their character. While gameplay and role-play overlapped (creative solutions, for instance, were often ground in a player acting according to their character) the emphasis in these memorable moments always on the *quality* and *sociality* of role-play, rather than mechanical aspects of D&D. Only one memorable role-play moment involved a Nat20.

**5.2.1. Ethics.** The most common category (n=12/40) of memorable roleplay moments were ones involving ethical considerations of some kind.

One quarter of the memorable ethical roleplay moments (n=3/12) involved characters accidentally making decisions that violated their character’s moral code, such as a character who had taken an oath not to kill but killed a villain to save his friends (25M, DM/Player), or mistaking an innocent NPC for an enemy (41M, DM). These actions that transgressed their character’s moral code provided the opportunity for role-playing that was memorable to the players.

Half of the moments focused on the social aspect of ethics role-play; debating within the group—in-character—about how to proceed against an in-game ethical quandary. Several resembled this moment expressed by a participant:

Our group was given a choice of 3 factions to ally with and no clear best choice. Each option had some risks and ethical issues attached. We proceeded to spend the entire 4 hour session heartily debating which choice to take. (31F, Player)

In these examples, the ethical question posed to players similarly provides a resource for role-playing as their character, as D&D characters often have well-defined moral codes based on their fictional background. As one response put it, “an unexpected moral quandary that arose naturally due to the differing philosophies of the characters. Everyone was in character and invested” (22F, DM/Player).

Here we also found a clear example of the kinds of ‘pivotal’ moments that Sidhu & Carter (2021) describe, where a group had decided to attempt to save a child sacrifice, despite the DM making it clear “they would all certainly die” if they tried. When asked why, “she told me that ‘If you’re living in a world filled with evil, you have a choice to refuse to be a part of it.’ I think about that a lot” (19NB, DM/Player). Playing a game is an act of moral interpretation (Sicart, 2009). As D&D gives players the responsibility to choose what is right (or wrong), it forces players to engage with the morality of their actions and this can, as Hollander puts it, “result in moral and political maturation for the players” (2021, p. 325) transformative effect upon how we understand the morality of our everyday actions (see also Wright et al. 2020).

The final three moments involved betrayal; either being betrayed (“an incredible character moment that shocked me as a player” [29F, DM/Player]) or being the betrayer. These moments mapped closely to prior research into the appeal of *Treacherous Play* (Carter, 2022), in the enjoyment of exploring an immoral sub-identity and the capacity for experiences like being

“bewildered and hurt” (25F, Player) to contribute to the appeal of games (see also Stenros & Bowman, 2018).

**5.2.2. In-Game Relationships.** One quarter of memorable roleplay moments (n=10/40) were focused on in-game relationships. Predominantly, these were based on the strength of these in-game relationships and the meaning of these relationships to the player: acts of loyalty to each other (21M, DM/Player), a character supporting another character with PTSD whose player would roleplay panic attacks (63F, Player), or two characters getting engaged in-game (25F, DM/Player). As one player summarized:

My most memorable moment was when my group in game started to grow together and finally realized that we became some sort of a family than just travel partners. (30F, DM/Player)

In contrast to these examples, where the role-playing of close relationships was memorable, we also saw how in-game relationships were—like ethical situations or sacrifice—resources for role-playing. In one case, it was finding out a character’s former lover was one of the bad guys (39F, DM/Player), in another it was “a fantastic moment of growth” when a character was finally able to confront their abusive ex (21F, DM/Player). A third of the responses in this category (3 out of 10, 30%) emphasized the heightened emotional experience of this type of role-play, such as a best friend dying (25F, Player/DM), or a speech from a long-lost lover resulting in “everyone in the party, including the GM holding back tears” (24NB, DM/Player).

**5.2.3. Roleplay.** Six responses described memorable moments of role-play that were memorable simply because of the quality of the role-playing. For instance, “While playing a bard, writing and playing custom songs based on the campaign” (54M, Player). Another example saw an Orc barbarian throw valuable books into the sea because the Orc barbarian didn’t read (36M, DM/Player). While this frustrated the party’s ability to proceed in their quest, it was memorable to the player because they “put role first” and didn’t metagame by using their out-of-character knowledge that these books were important. Quality role-playing in its own right.

One third of these memorable moments emphasized the heightened emotional experience they had while roleplaying. For one, “this moment of being drawn in and becoming terrified by roleplay has definitely stuck with me”, while for another it was about “finding moments of deep investment as characters who are completely different from myself”. In this theme, we again see how roleplay provides players safe access to negative experiences that are part of D&D’s appeal.

**5.2.4. Sacrifice.** Six responses described a memorable moment of sacrifice, where a player-character sacrificed themselves to save their team:

One of my characters not hesitating to save another PC from certain death, even though it would result in his own death. (28 No Answer, DM/Player)

All of these memorable moments involved player-character death, mapping to the gameplay death theme (see 5.1.5.) finding that death provides a rich resource for memorable moments of gameplay, and that negative experiences like these contribute to D&D’s appeal.

What distinguished these memorable moments from gameplay death, however, was the emphasis on character-choice rather than an unfortunate dice role. It was “when my character made a deal with her patron to die instead of her best friend” (26F, DM/Player), or “my character spent several of her turns helping her strongest party member lift the trapdoor so the rest of the party could escape” (24F, DM/Player). Prior research on the appeal of permadeath has argued that meaningful play is a crucial requirement for the positive experience of permadeath (Carter & Allison, 2017). In these examples of sacrifice, we see how roleplay helps make permadeath meaningful, by situating the death in a character’s personality.

**5.2.5. Creative.** Mapping closely to the memorable creative gameplay moments, three moments of memorable roleplay were where the players overcame an in-game obstacle, but through roleplaying well, e.g.:

Playing a dumb character I pretended he didn’t understand and got the Sphinx to keep rephrasing the instructions until she rephrased them as a question like “Do you understand now?”. The character was then able to say “Yes” and claim to have answered a question and should be allowed to proceed. The DM laughed and rolled with it (44M, DM/Player)

These moments were similar to the memorable roleplay moments in the previous category but were centered around overcoming obstacles rather than just the quality of the roleplay itself. As with creative gameplay memorable moments, we see in these moments how D&D’s capacity to support creative thinking and novel problem solving creates opportunities for positive and memorable experiences.

**5.2.6. Funny.** Finally, three moments were simply memorable because they were funny: a bread obsessed monk, arguing about bread—true to their character—at an inopportune moment (19F, DM/Player); turning into

a packhorse to avoid an awkward conversation (29F, Player); or an in-game prank against another player that (as a consequence of a Nat20 on an intimidation roll) causes another player-character to “shit their pants” (22F, DM/Player).

### 5.3. Memorable Storytelling

Storytelling emerged as a third theme to describe memorable moments that were based in the storytelling of D&D. While all D&D play is storytelling in a way, moments captured in this section center around the plot: broader narrative of play (see also Haarman, 2022, p.62-63). The emergence of this theme was unsurprising, as Story/Narrative Progression was the highest rated gameplay element in that aspect of the survey (Top 2 Box Score: n=325, 91.81%).

**5.3.1. Storytelling.** Eleven responses in this theme were coded, like section 5.2.3., simply as storytelling. These were a diverse set of moments that were memorable because they were examples of good storytelling. This encompassed satisfying villain reveals or betrayals, or a DM whose “incredible world building and descriptions stunned all of us for minutes” (26F, DM/Player).

Four responses reflected what we refer to as ‘meaningful storytelling’, via Salen & Zimmerman’s (2003) meaningful play concept. These were moments in D&D where the consequence of earlier actions were revealed to players, with an impact upon the storyline.

Unwittingly befriending the main antagonist in a low level game, saving his life outside the DM script and 10 levels and 2 IRL years later he makes an appearance to return the favour in the almost unbelieving but brilliantly orchestrated circumstances (45M, DM/Player)

As one player described, “it was cool that a whim made a big difference farther on” (31F, Player). Two of these responses also pointed to the incorporation of their character’s backstory into the main campaign as having made the storytelling moment memorable.

When my first character progressed to a higher level and his backstory was incorporated into the main campaign and made the back story have weight and feel real (25M, DM/Player)

Salen & Zimmerman (2003) describe meaningful play as “the relationship between player action and system outcome” which must be “both discernible and integrated into the larger context of the game” (pp. 33–34). These examples of meaningful storytelling are memorable for players because the outcomes of their

actions are integrated, in a discernable way, into the storytelling of the D&D campaign.

**5.3.2. Epic.** Seven of the storytelling moments were initially difficult to categorize, before we adopted a respondents’ terminology to describe their memorable moment: “epic storytelling”. While these are quality moments of storytelling like in the previous section, the emphasis was on the scale of their in-game fictional significance, such as a player being promoted to demi-god status (38M, DM/Player), meeting Cthulhu and pledging their soul (31NB, Player), or getting to make two god-like beings angry by refusing to choose a side in their conflict (23M, DM/Player). Each of these memorable moments center the player’s character in the arc of the main campaign in a way that is aptly described by ‘epic’:

When my paladin gave a sermon and the whole city got bonuses on the next fight. (40F, Player)

Like the prior code, these memorable moments of epic storytelling reflect the appeal of good storytelling to D&D play. ‘Epic’ moments like these highlight the importance (to some players) of the grand story of great significance, for a city, world or entire dimension, and the ability to be centered in that via their character.

**5.3.3. Funny.** As with the other themes, some moments of storytelling were memorable because they were funny or absurd: turning a quest into a buddy cop movie (32M, DM/Player); running naked through an abandoned town (27F, DM/Player); de-railing the main campaign by creating a cult (26F, Player); crashing a ship into a city (23M, Player). These also included storytelling in-jokes, such as one player who answered, “Every campaign I play I lose one part of my body, but mostly the arm” (18M, DM/Player).

## 6. Discussion

In a competitive media environment, D&D’s continuing popularity is likely attributed to several factors: its legacy, accessibility, and the impact of livestreaming and representations in media, being some (Chalk, 2019; Jones, 2021; Sidhu & Carter 2020). Prior scholarship and critical texts have variously summarized its appeal as being grounded in its support for social interactions (Abbott et al., 2021; Adams, 2013; Fine 1983), roleplay (Bowman, 2010; Wright et al., 2020; Daniau, 2016), immersion (Mizer, 2019) and storytelling (Enfield 2007; Sullivan 2010).

This paper contributes to this area of work through a close analysis of D&D player’s most memorable moments playing the game, which we found represent a form of peak experience that summarize the appeal of a

game to a player in a way that offers insight into how this appeal is connected to specific aspects of the game’s design. In the subsequent section, we discuss the three most prominent examples of this in our data: the critical role of the ‘Nat20’ mechanic, how ethics and in-game relationships enable memorable roleplay, and the enduring appeal of being the hero.

### 6.1. The Critical Role of a Critical Roll

‘Nat20’ emerged as a prominent theme in the axial coding process in response to the frequency with which rolling a ‘Natural 20’—D&D lexicon for getting the highest possible score from a dice roll, which in gameplay terms means whatever act the player was attempting succeeds with aplomb—was mentioned (24 or 170 responses). When cross-referenced against the themes, it was then realized that Nat20s were predominant in memorable gameplay moments, only being mentioned in one roleplay moment, and one storytelling moment.

**Table 2. Distribution of Nat20 (or Nat1) across the memorable gameplay moments.**

Codes	# Responses	# Nat20 (%)
<b>Gameplay</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>22 (35%)</b>
Achievement	20	7 (35%)
Funny	14	7 (50%)
Creative	11	2 (18%)
Drama	10	3 (30%)
Death	8	3 (38%)

We argue that this highlights the critical role that the ‘Nat20’ mechanic has in facilitating memorable moments and can help us understand the nature of these memorable moments in more detail. For instance, 7 of 20 memorable gameplay achievement moments were due to the player rolling a Nat20 (or several in a row) and subsequently singlehandedly defeating a powerful villain or saving their D&D party. In these cases, the Nat20 mechanic enables a DM to make a player feel powerful and individualizes their achievement because it was the player that rolled the critical die. A comparable mechanic—say, requiring all players to simultaneously roll a die—would not reward individual achievement and satisfy the desire for players to be the hero, a sentiment we also saw across achievement, sacrifice, and storytelling themes.

In contrast, Nat20s were rarest in the instances of creative gameplay, where play was memorable because of teamwork, and where the satisfaction of overcoming an obstacle was not in power or domination but in having solved the problem through original and creative thinking. Here we see how the individualizing nature of

the Nat20 mechanic also exteriorizes the achievement, placing it in the dice roll rather than creative thinking.

That notwithstanding the three mentions of Nat20s in creative moments reflected the power of the ‘Nat20’ mechanic to turn any solution—no matter how absurd—into a wildly successful one. This was similar to the highest prominence of Nat20s in funny gameplay moments, where the Nat20 mechanic enables a creative DM to introduce the absurd; to create the kinds of funny, shared social moments that players find appealing, and memorable.

### 6.2. Enabling Memorable Roleplay

Roleplay is well understood as a core part of D&D’s appeal (Bowman, 2010). In this paper, our approach of studying memorable roleplay moments offers new insights into understanding what ‘good’ roleplay looks like (that is, roleplay that is appealing to players), and the elements of D&D’s design that contribute to it.

For instance, it was clear from the prominence of the ethics theme that ethical considerations and issues are a rich resource for enabling good roleplay. One of the reasons for this is that D&D players often have well-defined moral codes that are fleshed out by their fictional backgrounds. A D&D paladin, for instance, is a holy crusader who has sworn an oath. This oath provides a prompt against which a player can steadfastly roleplay their passionate objection to a decision that violates this moral code, no matter the consequence. In doing so, this moral code—this developed moral subjectivity of the player character—becomes more real, and more instantiated. Thus moments in particular become memorable roleplay moments.

Another example of this were the in-game relationships, which we similarly consider a resource for good roleplay. By in-game relationships, we refer to the relationships between characters—rivals, friends, lovers—that are often distinct from the relationships between players. This aspect of D&D enables good roleplay by similarly providing players a resource against which they can make meaningful and memorable decisions. Where a Paladin’s oath might provide a prompt to not abandon a doomed party-member, an in-game relationship might provide a similar resource. In drawing on this in-game relationship as a basis for decision making, these in-game relationships similarly become more real, and more instantiated.

Of course, across all these moments of memorable roleplay were highly valenced emotional experiences. Death, sacrifice, defeating an abusive ex; all of these are “positive negative experiences” (Bopp et al., 2016) that rely on the delicate balance between player immersion



and safety. As we have argued elsewhere (2021), D&D provides a “safe social space to genuinely experience or perform traditionally “negative” emotions, such as grief, shock, loss, and guilt, which commonly follow death” (p. 10). While this study focused on the way that character-death is an attractive experience for players, our study highlights how these same positive-negative experiences can be drawn from other areas of D&D roleplay, with potentially similar transformative effect.

Therefore, in the same way we identify the ‘Nat20’ critical roll mechanic as an element of D&D’s design that creates or facilitates memorable moments, we can identify these common themes for D&D roleplay as a part of D&D’s design that facilitates memorable play. This offers empirical evidence for the inclusion of these types of themes, and the encouragement of in-game relationships, as a design strategy for appealing TTRPG experiences, and once again highlights the strength of the memorable moments methodology we’ve developed in this paper.

### 6.3. Enduring Appeal of Being a Hero

The final example of how D&D’s design facilitates memorable moments is in the prominence of heroism. This is of course, unsurprising; heroic adventurism is core to the play of D&D and has been extensively discussed in prior work (Leopold, 2019; Nelson, 2019).

In the present study, we identified heroism in a number of contexts. This was most prominent in memorable achievement gameplay moments, which typically involved moments of individual power, such as singlehandedly defeating a powerful enemy. As noted, these moments were often enabled by the ‘Nat20’ critical roll mechanic, but not always. Responses also described heroic moments in their creative solutions, in their moments of sacrificial roleplay, and in epic moments of storytelling.

What connects these different memorable moments is the way in which they center the player-character in a positive way. Prior research conducted on TTRPG offers insight into understanding the appeal of such moments. Sarah Bowman (2010), for instance, discusses the appeal of roleplaying as a favorable alteration of identity. Similarly, Katherine Bessiere et al. (2007) demonstrated that *World of Warcraft* offers “players to create idealized characters as virtual, alternative selves” (p. 533). That is, players created characters that players perceived as being closer to their ideal identity, versus their perceived actual self. In this context, we argue that the appeal of being a hero in D&D is that it allows players to vicariously experience the being a hero themselves (see also the concept of ‘Bleed’, Bowman, 2015; Hugaas, 2022).

Thus, while D&D play involves establishing

boundaries between the player and character in order to experience negative emotions surrounding death or betrayal in a safe way, these boundaries are permeable. Heroism remains a key feature of D&D’s appeal, alongside other positive social traits like teamwork, social connectedness and being funny.

## 7. Conclusion & Future Work

This paper has presented the results from an online survey that sought to better understand the enduring appeal of D&D. Through a close analysis of answers to the question “*What has been your most memorable moment in a D&D game? Please describe an example from your own play*”, we have provided new insights into the appeal of D&D that goes beyond simplistic descriptions of ‘fun’ or ‘social’ and connected these to elements of D&D’s design. Many of these elements are of course common across other TTRPGs; we note in particular prior work such as by Evan Torner on the importance of dice-based uncertainty in TTRPGs (see Torner, 2014), and that the critical roll mechanic was first introduced in *Empire of the Petal Throne* in 1975, and not a feature of D&D until 1995. Future work could productively look beyond D&D to understand the impact of other design elements in other TTRPGs.

In this paper we have also demonstrated the strength of what we have come to refer to as the ‘memorable moment methodology’, the study of games via their most memorable moments in concert with an analysis of game elements. Memorable moments represent a form of peak play experience that summarizes the appeal of a game for an individual player, and is thus a useful question to ask in qualitative studies of player experience. As we have shown in this paper, studying memorable moments elicits rich responses that can be usefully connected back to a games’ affordances. We argue that this method is an additional contribution to the field.

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